Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that American high schools are not nearly as good as they need to be. Large numbers of students – 30 percent or more – do not even make it to graduation. And even among those who do, far too few are prepared for post-secondary education or work.

Among high schools serving low-income students and students of color, the numbers are much worse. Nearly half of these students don't graduate on time. Those who do graduate have skills at the end of high school that are on average similar to the skills that White and more affluent students have at the end of middle school.

The nation's governors have put high school reform at the top of their agendas, charging their association – the National Governors Association – with energizing a multi-year effort to overhaul high school education. Across the country, reformers are stepping forward with new high school "designs" aimed at preparing students for the challenges of 21st-century life.

The Education Trust decided to look underneath the rather dismal overall averages at some high schools that are producing unusually strong results for all students. We thought these schools might have something to teach us.

In this report, we examine three schools that serve mostly low-income or minority students. Two of the three schools are performing in the top tiers of their respective states; the other is one of the fastest improving high schools in its state. What makes these schools special is that they are succeeding with students who usually are on the wrong end of the achievement gap—poor students and students of color. Such schools are not common, but they do exist. Their very existence stands as proof that high schools can do more than we have ever expected.

University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Nassau County, New York, are the two highly successful schools profiled here. They have high overall student proficiency rates, small or nonexistent achievement gaps, and better than average ability to hold on to students through the 12th grade[1].

Except for the fact that they are both in urban areas, University Park and Elmont could not be more different from each other. University Park is small, with 200 students, 12 teachers, a principal and a school secretary. Most University Park students enter seventh grade reading well below grade level, but by 10th grade they all pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System high school exit test. Elmont, on the other hand, is a large, urban school with almost 2,000 students in a big, sprawling building. Through careful organization and high expectations, most students make it to senior year and all seniors graduate, 69 percent with the rigorous Regents diploma.

The third school is Granger High School, a rural school in the Yakima Valley of Washington state. It was selected because it has made significant achievement gains in recent years. We hope that it will provide an idea of how a school can get started on the path to improvement. Granger had horrific achievement data just six years ago, when only 20 percent of the 10th-graders met state reading standards, and fewer than half of that met state writing and math standards. Today, though it continues to serve students much poorer than the state average, it is closing in on state achievement averages and is poised to make even greater gains.

It is our hope that this report, in tandem with another on schools that are accelerating the academic growth of students, "Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students," will help give people who care about high school reform some examples of schools that are succeeding at a difficult task, as well as serve as a welcome reminder that it really is possible to teach all children to high levels. As the license plate of one of the principals in the report says: *Se puede*. (It can be done.)

[1] Promoting Power Index (PPI), which was created by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, was used. PPI compares the number of 12th-graders enrolled to the number of ninth-graders enrolled four years earlier.